

Apices in the Vindolanda Tablets

Adams (1995: 97–8, 2003: 531–2) collected most examples of *apices* in the Vindolanda tablets in Tab. Vindol. II and III. Including some doubtful cases, he counts 92 instances. We can add a further 7 found in the more recently published tablets, and 6 which he omitted.¹ With the new cases we have a total of 105 instances of *apices* (Table 35), of which 82 = 78% are on long vowels, and 19 = 18% are on short vowels, with a further 2 = 2% on vowels which were short but used to be long, and 2 = 2% on vowels of uncertain length (Table 36).²

It seems likely that use of *apices* was a practice restricted to, or at least most common among, scribes at (and around) Vindolanda. While it is not always easy to tell whether a given tablet at Vindolanda was written by a scribe or by another writer, letters often feature a second hand which provides the final salutation formula, and in these cases it is reasonable to suppose that the first hand is that of a scribe. Sometimes these hands also appear in other texts. The following texts have *apices* in scribal parts: Tab. Vindol. 234,³ 239, 242, 243, 245, 248, 263, 291, 292, 305, 310, 311, 611,⁴ 613, 622, perhaps 628,⁵ 641, 706. Conversely, there are very few or no examples of *apices* in texts which we know or suspect not to

¹ *Córis* (175), *censús* (304), *J.s.nió* (325), *s[[s]]ummá* (645), *diligénter* (693), *frám* (734). I follow Adams (1995: 97) in leaving out ‘the (mostly doubtful) cases listed by the editors from 371–513’.

² As discussed above (p. 213), *ego* certainly had a short vowel at the period of the Vindolanda tablets, although Adams counts the two instances among the long vowels. It is also possible that word-final long vowels had also been shortened, at least in the iambic verbal forms *rogo* and *puto*, and possibly in all cases (see pp. 42–3), but I count these as long here.

³ In addition to the fact that the hand of this draft letter is the same as that of 239, whereas Cerialis’ own hand is probably used in the letters 225–232, the writer of this letter at one point wrote and erased *et hiem*, replacing it with *etiam*, suggesting that he was taking dictation and misanalysed what he had heard.

⁴ Although this letter may have been sent to Genialis from Corbridge, and therefore not have been written by scribes at Vindolanda.

⁵ If *uale* is written in a second hand.

Table 35 Apices in the *Vindolanda* tablets

Long vowels	Text (Tab. Vindol.)	Short vowels originally long	Text (Tab. Vindol.)	Short vowels	Text (Tab. Vindol.)	Vowels of uncertain length	Text (Tab. Vindol.)
Laterarió compendiárium	194	egó egó	645	rógo Córis	175	censús ^a	304
á á Brocc hó	196			-neariá	192	Frám ^b	734
Verecundó suó	212			-brá membrá sagá	198		
aequó (?) Cassió	215				207		
Fláuito	221			óptamus	248		
Octóbres	234			Káalendarum sacrifició	265		
Fláuius suó	239			Seuerá facturá	291		

Table 35 (cont.)

Long vowels	Text (Tab. Vindol.)	Short vowels originally long	Text (Tab. Vindol.)	Short vowels	Text (Tab. Vindol.)	Vowels of uncertain length	Text (Tab. Vindol.)
numerátioni	242			necessariá	292		
suó	243			t.[c. 6.]á ^c	588		
fráter	245			mágis (possibly)	611		
-ró ^d	248			dómine	628		
tú	255			uólui	645		
Flauió				itá ^e			
suó	261			diligénter	693		
tuó	263			dómine (possibly)	796		
fráter	265						
sácrifició							
uoluerás							
rogó	291						
interuentú							
salutá							
faciás							

Brocchó	292
uná	
Vettió	305
Seueró	
exoró	307
suó	310
cupió	311
putó	
scribó	
rogó	
nómina	
Veranió	319
suó	
-inná ^f	324
]..s.nióg ^g	325
meó	330
Licinió	580
stabuló	581
á	588
[r]atió	608

Table 35 (*cont.*)

Long vowels	Text (Tab. Vindol.)	Short vowels originally long	Text (Tab. Vindol.)	Short vowels	Text (Tab. Vindol.)	Vowels of uncertain length	Text (Tab. Vindol.)
Flaiúo	611						
tantó (possibly)							
Flaiúo	613						
Lepidiná (possibly)	622						
rogó	628						
uexsilló							
rogó							
praecipías							
suó	631						
Flaiúo	632						
occasió	640						
á							
Marinó	641						
Flórus	644						
meó	645						
gesseró							
Coccejó							
Maritimó							
fussá							
morá							

s[[s]]ummá	
Flauió	648
fació	652
Priscinó	663
benefició	666
illórum	693
immó	706
tuá	880
Verecuñdó	893
suó	
Decuminó	
Iulíó	
Verecundó	
Decmó	893 add

^a The editors suggest a gen. sg. *censūs*, but the context is damaged, and nom. sg. *census* cannot be ruled out.

^b On the back of a tablet, probably a name in the address of a letter.

^c Perhaps *tr[ans]la[ta]*.

^d Probably part of a name.

^e But the text is not certain here.

^f Probably a name in the ablative.

^g This is in the address on the back of the letter: it will be a name in the dative.

Table 36 *Distribution of apices in the Vindolanda tablets*

Vowel letter	Long	Short	Originally long	Uncertain length	Percentage of total apices
a	21	12		1	32%
e		1			1%
o	59	6	2		64%
u	2			1	3%
Percentage of total apices	78%	18%	2%	2%	

be written by scribes, such as the letters written by Cerialis (225–232), the *renuntium* reports written by the *optiones* (127–153), the relatively long closing messages of Lepidina at 291 and 292 (both letters where the scribe uses *apices*), the letters of Octavius (343) and Florus (643),⁶ and the writer of the letter 344 and accounts 180 and 181.⁷ Of course, it may be that there was a feeling that letters were more formal documents than other types of text, so that use of *apices* in them may have been more appropriate, as Adams suggests (see fn. 14). However, this does not explain why we don't find *apices* in the parts of letters written by non-scribes.

Furthermore, the scribes appear to have been trained in, or to have developed among themselves, a usage of *apices* that is characteristic of the Vindolanda tablets. Firstly, use of the *apex* is highly restricted in terms of vowel quality, with /a:/ and /ɔ:/ making up practically all the vowels with an *apex* (101/105 = 96%); secondly, it is highly restricted in terms of position in the word. Not including monosyllables, of which there are 5, 80 (= 80%) instances of the *apex* are on the final syllable, 76 (= 95%) of these are on an absolute word-final vowel,⁸ and 75 (94%) are on <o> or <a>.⁹ This means that out of all 105 instances of *apices*, 71% are on absolute word-final <o> or <a>.

⁶ On which, see Adams (2003: 530, 533–5).

⁷ Note also the comment by Bowman and Thomas (1994: 59) that 'there is no instance of the use of an apex in a military document'.

⁸ The exceptions are *uoluerás, faciás, praecipíás, censús*.

⁹ The exception is *interuentú*.

Now, these are doubtless the most frequent word-final vowels in Latin, probably both in terms of type within the language and token within most texts, but the disproportion in terms of both *apex* position in the word and letter on which the *apex* is placed marks the Vindolanda tablets out from other texts containing *apices* (as we will see in Chapter 21).

Adams (2003: 531) makes two possible suggestions for the preponderance of final <ó> and <á>:

either that a stylized form of writing is at issue, such that writers, if they remembered, signed off words ending in one or the other of the two long vowels with a sort of flourish, or, if a linguistic explanation is to be sought, that long vowels in final position were subject to shortening in speech, and that scribes were encouraged to use the apex as a mnemonic for preserving the ‘correct’ quantity.

It seems to me less likely that Adams’ linguistic explanation is correct. It is important to note that nearly every word-final /ɔ/ in Latin was long (and all examples of short /ɔ/ came from original /ɔ:/, by iambic shortening). This was not the case with /a/ and /a:/. Therefore, if shortening of absolute final vowels had occurred, and the scribes were trying to mark vowels that ought to be long, they would succeed simply by putting an *apex* on practically every word-final <o>. When it came to <a>, however, such an approach would not work. Indeed, this is what we find: there are only 8 examples of long final /a:/ with an *apex*, but 9 of short final /a/.

On the face of it, therefore, this is evidence in favour of shortening of word-final vowels: in cases where the scribes actively had to recognise whether an /a/ was long or short, they could not. However, it seems somewhat surprising that the scribes, who were so successful in producing non-intuitive standard spelling in other ways, had not managed successfully to learn this particular feature. Moreover, if the *apex* was taught as a means of maintaining the correct quantity, it is surprising that we find it so often on final /ɔ/. After all, since there are practically no words which differ in meaning depending on whether final /ɔ/ is long or short, the value in marking it is very little compared to that of final /a/ and /a:/.¹⁰ Nor is there any

¹⁰ One could get around this argument by suggesting that the point of the use of the *apex* was not to demonstrate that the scribes knew which vowels should be long, nor to help with analysing the meaning of a word, but to aid the reader to pronounce the text correctly when reading aloud.

point, from this perspective, in the three examples of word-final /a:s/ in which the vowel bears an *apex*, since there are no verb forms ending in /as/ with which they could have been confused (nor was there a shortening taking place of non-word-final vowels). In addition, when *apices* are used on non-final syllables, they appear with equal frequency on short vowels as on long vowels (10/20 instances; see Table 37), even though vowel length was still maintained in non-final syllables at this time.¹¹ All of this suggests that marking vowel length may not have been the primary purpose of the *apex*.

Given the divergence of the placement of the *apex* at Vindolanda from what Quintilian and ‘Scaurus’ say about the *apex*, and indeed its divergence from other inscriptions and corpora discussed below, it seems reasonable to assume that the scribes were using *apices* according to their own rules or sense of where an *apex* was appropriate, which can only be derived from the evidence of the Vindolanda tablets themselves. Although these

Table 37 *Apices on vowels in non-final syllables at Vindolanda*

Stressed long vowel	Unstressed long vowel	Stressed short vowel	Unstressed short vowel	Unclear stress
compendiárum	numerátioní	rógo	óptamus	Frám
Fláuío		dómine	Káalendarum	
Octóbres		uólui	sácrifició	
Fláuíus		mágis		
fráter		dómine		
fráter		Córis		
nómina		diligénter		
Flórus				
illórum				

¹¹ If one really wanted to maintain the idea that the *apex* was aiming to mark vowel length, one would have to suppose that vowel length had also become non-contrastive in non-final syllables; while this did take place on the way into the Romance languages, it is highly unlikely that it had taken place as early as the period of the Vindolanda tablets (Adams 2013: 43–51; Loporcaro 2015: 18–60).

rules or feelings were not necessarily shared by all scribes, or used consistently by any given scribe, overall we can identify some tendencies. Starting from this position, without preconceived ideas, the most important principle seems to be that the *apex* should appear on /ɔ(:)/ or, less often, on /a(:)/; the next most important that it should appear on a vowel in the final syllable of a word (ideally on a vowel which is word-final).¹² Given these principles, it is inevitable that most *apices* will end up on long vowels (or at least vowels which were originally long, if shortening of word-final long vowels has taken place), but this will be epiphenomenal, rather than being a principle in itself.¹³

If the reason for these ranked principles is not linguistic, what is it? It could be connected with the fact that *apices* seem to be used more in letters than in other types of text.¹⁴ Using the list showing all tablets from Tab. Vindol. II and III, at Vindolanda Tablets Online II,¹⁵ I count 129 non-letters, and 206 letters. There are 67 documents containing *apices*, of which 54 are letters, 12 are not, and 1 is uncertain. The proportion of documents containing *apices* that are letters is thus much higher than the proportion of letters as

¹² 96% of *apices* at Vindolanda are on /ɔ(:)/ or /a(:)/; 77% are on /ɔ(:)/ or /a(:)/ in a final syllable (including 4 monosyllables); 74% are on /ɔ(:)/ or /a(:)/ word-finally.

¹³ On the practice of individual scribes, see below. I find only one letter of sufficient length for which a strong case could be made that it is using *apices* specifically to mark long vowels (or at least /ɔ:/, which has an *apex* in *cupiō, putō, scribō, rogō, nōmina*). Except for *homo*, and in the address on the back, which contains *Batauorum*, there are no other instances of /ɔ:/ in the text. One could explain the lack of *apex* on *homō* by supposing that it had a short final vowel in speech at this time; note that it is iambic, and that there is no /ɔ:/ elsewhere in the paradigm. However, even if /ɔ:/ was normally preserved, it could also be relevant, assuming the letter was dictated, that *homo* is followed by a word beginning with a vowel, and hence may have been elided or shortened; the other instances at word end were followed by a clause end, or a word beginning with a consonant, as far as we can tell.

¹⁴ 'Rather more apices are used in the letters than in the accounts and other documents (about 87 per cent of the total are in letters), and a significant number (as was the case in the earlier tablets) are on names in the address of letters (for example, all four cases of *Flauio*). It would seem that there was a certain stylization about the use of the *apex* which made it more appropriate to creative or formal composition (that is, letters, particularly in the address) than to mundane lists' (Adams 2003: 531–2). See also Adams (1995: 98).

¹⁵ web.archive.org/web/20160704222601/http://vto2.classics.ox.ac.uk/index.php/tablets/view-all-tablets (accessed 27/04/2021). Descripta and minor texts have been discounted, since they include both letters and other texts; note that 'miscellaneous' stands for 'miscellaneous correspondence'.

a whole at Vindolanda.¹⁶ There is other evidence that it was a feature of letter writing for *apices* to have been used on word-final <o> of datives in the greeting formula in the prescript of a letter or the address of a letter on the back, a usage which continues into the third century AD in papyrus letters (Kramer 1991: 142; Bowman and Thomas 1994: 60–1).¹⁷ About a third of *apices* at Vindolanda occur in this context, almost all of them on final <o>. Indeed, there are a certain number of letters where an *apex* does not appear anywhere except in this context.¹⁸ A plausible instance of these factors being important is Tab. Vindol. 893, a letter whose author was Caecilius Secundus, the prefect of a unit, probably in the late 80s AD. There are five datives of the second declension with final /o:/, and all five are marked with an *apex*. Two of these are found in the greetings formula (*Verecundó suó*), and two in the address on the back (*Iulió Verecundó*), and the remaining instance is a proper name coming directly after the greeting (*Decuminó*). No other vowels are marked in the text, which includes one other instance of word-final /o:/ in *scito* and several of long final /a:/ (*de qua re, in praesentia*, as well as the preposition *a*).

With regard to the position of *apices* in non-final syllables, Bowman and Thomas (1994: 60) have suggested that the presence of the accent may be relevant. As Adams (1995: 97–8, 2003: 531–2) points out, this is not an appealing argument on the basis of Occam’s razor, since this factor cannot explain the far greater number of *apices* on the final syllable. It is true that there is a certain amount of correlation between *apices* on non-final syllables and the position of the accent, with 16/20 (= 80%) of

¹⁶ This is statistically significant, with a *p*-value of .000538. To calculate the *p*-value, I used the exact binomial test of goodness of fit spreadsheet available at www.biostathandbook.com/exactbin.xls (accessed 09/07/2020), with 54 and 12 entered as observed distribution, and 206 and 129 entered as expected proportions.

¹⁷ The particular appropriateness of the greeting formula for *apices* is suggested by the long and well-preserved text CEL 140, from Oxyrhynchus, AD 103 (copy of an official letter), in which *suó* is the only word with an *apex* (including *CJelsiano*, the name with which it agrees). Likewise, in CEL 154, from Karanis in Egypt and dated to AD 140, the only *apex* is on *Iulió* in the greeting.

¹⁸ Those in which there is enough text remaining for this to seem likely to be a meaningful distinction are Tab. Vindol. 255, 305, 310, 613, 632, 641, 648; several other letters with *apices* preserve little other than the greeting and/or address.

instances of *apices* appearing on vowels in stressed syllables. However, almost the same success rate is found by positing a rule that *apices* must appear on the initial syllable of a word (16/21 cases = 76%).¹⁹ Ultimately, the problem is the slightness of the evidence.

I conclude that the very specific tendencies around *apex* use at Vindolanda probably are not based around their use of diacritics for linguistic purposes, but more as markers of the different part of the text. This would be rather similar to their usage in the Isola Sacra inscriptions. In addition to the tendency for *apices* to be used in greetings formulas which I have already mentioned, we also find the opposite pattern, where the main text contains *apices*, which are lacking in the greeting. For example, the brief letter Tab. Vindol. 265 contains a high number of *apices*, all of which come after the greeting formula *Çerĩalı suo salutem*. Almost every subsequent instance of /a(:)/ receives one (*fráter, sácrifició, káalendarum, uøuerás*), along with word-final /ɔ:/ in *sácrifició* (and not *ego*). This also has the effect of marking the different parts of the letter. The same pattern is found in 248.

This is not to say that this type of text-marking was the only function of the *apex*. Sometimes, it seems to have been used out of pure exuberance, and without consistency. An interesting case is the collection of letters Tab. Vindol. 243, 244, 248 and 291, all written by the same scribe. In 291, in the sections written by the scribe, almost every word-final vowel, whether long or short, receives an *apex* (only *tuo* is without): *salutá, rogó, interuentú,* and short /a/ in *Seuerá* (in the greeting formula) and *facturá*; in addition, *faciás* has one on a non-word-final vowel (although in a final syllable; no *apex* is found on *uenias, nos*). In 243, a five word fragment, *apices* appear on *suó* (in the greeting formula) and *fráter*, but not on the long vowels of *Çerĩalı* or *salutem*. 244 uses no *apices*, although only the line *Seuera mea uos salutat* and the address *Flauio Ceriali* survive. The largely undamaged 248 uses an *apex* only on *óptamus* and *tú*, but not on the only examples of word-final /ɔ(:)/ (*suo*, in the greeting, and *pro*; there are no

¹⁹ The additional example here comes from including *Frám* (734), whose *apex* is definitely on the initial syllable, although we do not know whether it was also the stressed syllable.

examples of word-final /a(:)/, nor on the other instance of *op<t>amus*, nor the two other instances of *frater*, which received an *apex* in 243.

By comparison, Tab. Vindol. 645 is a long letter, which fits much better than those written by the scribe of 243 etc. into the normal tendency at Vindolanda to use an *apex* on word-final /a(:)/ and /ɔ(:)/:²⁰ *meó*, *gesseró*, *fussá*, *egó* (twice), *morá*, *s[[s]]ummá*, *Coccejió*, *Maritimó* (the last two in the address), and *itá* (on a short /a/, if it is read correctly). According to the editors, the remaining instances of *meo* and of *ego* may have had *apices* which were lost; otherwise in the main body of the letter only *pro* and *opto* remain without an *apex* on word-final /a:/ or /ɔ:/, along with *eo*, *quo* in the postscript written between the columns, in which haste or space may have been a factor. There is also an *apex* on an initial vowel in *uólui*.²¹

Although consistency within a single document or across all of a scribe's output may not have been of great importance, the shared tendencies suggest that as a group the scribes of Vindolanda had developed their own habits of usage for *apices*.

²⁰ Although the letter was actually sent from outside Vindolanda.

²¹ Interestingly, this is also the only text in which a plausible case might be made for an analysis along the lines of that of Fortson (2020), for *apices* to be used to mark phrases: at any rate in the main text the final word of the prepositional phrases *ab patri meó*, *de fussá*, *sine morá*, *pro s[[s]]ummá* has an *apex*. Both *scire te uólui* (followed by an accusative and infinitive) and *quid gesseró* are also phrasal units. But neither of the instances of *egó*, nor *itá*, form a close phrase with any adjacent words.